

Interview by Matthew Sutcliffe

Photographs Paul Cornwell and BBC/Modern TV

For this series you tried to swim across the Mersey, accompanied by open water swimmer Dave Sandman. It's a tough swim and Dave was impressed with your attempt. How did it go?

Well, it was good. We did it in August and I imagined it would be a beautiful day. I don't know why I thought that. It turned out to be a sort of storm tossed, grey day and the Mersey was looking threateningly bleak and I hadn't quite realised how far across it was from Birkenhead to Liverpool.

So we plunged in and it was freezing cold, but after a little while it got better. But we hadn't got very far when a tanker started coming down the river – it was a big bugger – and the tide started to change. And so everybody got out and that was sort of the end of that. So it wasn't very successful I'm afraid.

At the other end of the river you went underground with a breathing apparatus team from the Environment Agency. What happened down there?

I went down into Moston Brook with the guys and they told me that the biggest thing they ever had to get out of a similar culvert was a mini, which had been washed down there. But it was a little bit smelly. I didn't make a big thing about it on the telly but it was, because it had been raining pretty heavily and there was a little bit of overflow going on down there.

But it's a very beautifully built thing, I must admit. It was a splendidly conceived arch of rather elegant Victorian brickwork and it was fantastic to walk down it. More elegant underground than what they've put up on top in the various new estates, I thought.

The team leader is a guy called Mark Whittaker who's been in the army. They were a great team, very supportive, and they said 'isn't this great, Griff?'. And it was great for a while, but I wouldn't have taken their jobs for anything.

So you decided to make this series about rivers – what's special about them for you?

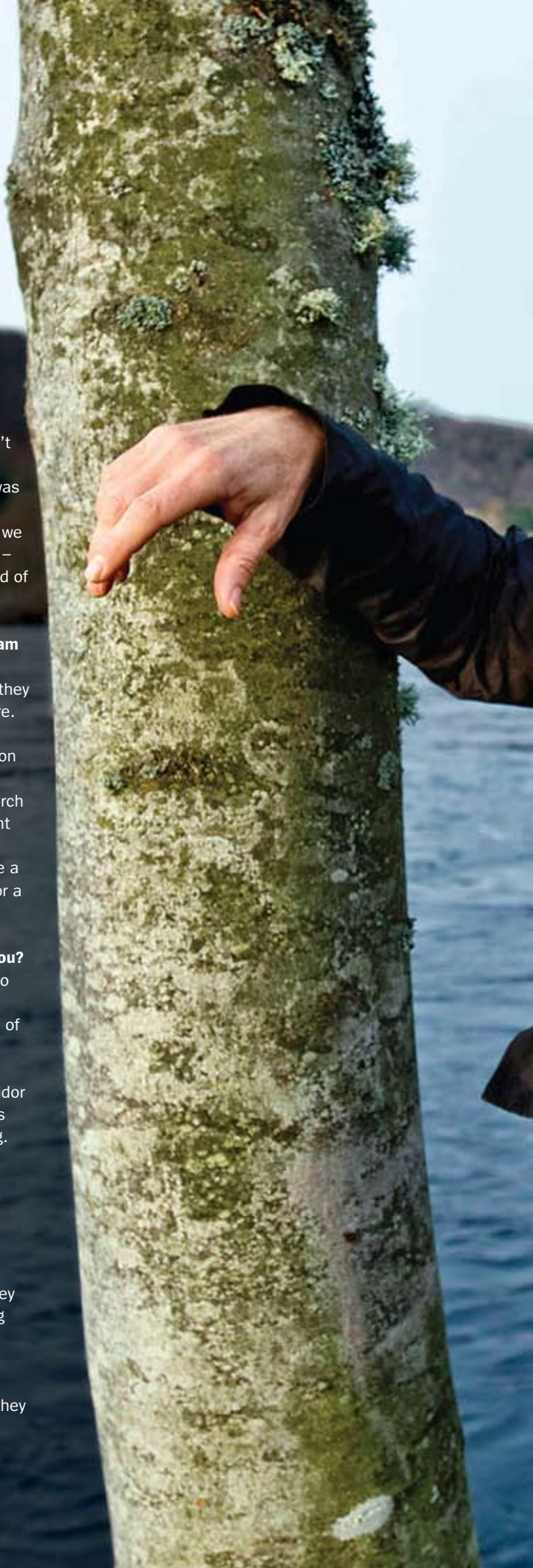
Well, I live on a river and I'm sort of drawn to the water. My father had a small boat, so I've always felt that it is impossible to live without some quantity of water nearby. It's something to do with not being enclosed in the countryside, because water has a life of its own.

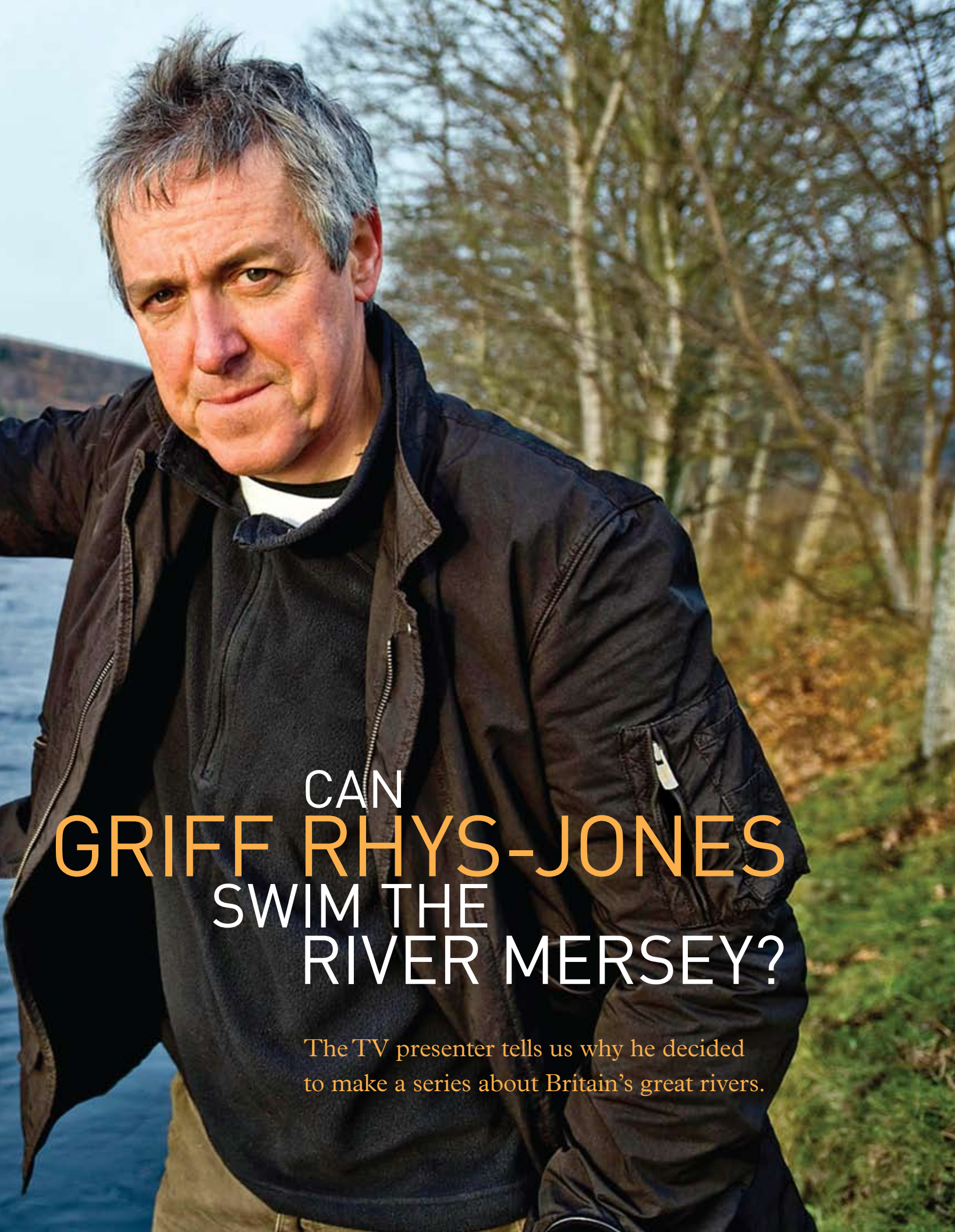
It's enshrined in the Magna Carta that we should have access to rivers and I'm in favour of people having access to them. They are a great life enhancer, a sort of corridor of natural elegance and beauty through our landscape. And one of the most harmless ways of exploring them is to sit yourself in an unpowered raft or canoe and drift along. I am absolutely staggered by the fact that such a wish is seen as so radical by many people who have the riparian rights [of access] in this country, and I think we need to change our attitude to that.

I think the public love rivers and are very respectful of them. The best way to maintain interest in them is not to keep them just for the water authorities, or for canoeists or for fisherman, but to try and find a way of bringing everybody to the riverbank and allowing them to use the river – not to piss in, but to enjoy. Because they are beautiful, spiritually nurturing things and when you view a river in full flood running down through a beautiful valley, then you feel you are somewhere special. It is also a landscape that is changing all the time and being adapted. There's great beauty in our rivers.

When you see the way that rivers can meander across landscapes, the way that they create and are part of the landscape, it's part of the joy of being by a river, I think.

The book that accompanies Griff's series, *Rivers: a journey into the heart of Britain*, is available in bookshops.





CAN GRIFF RHYS-JONES SWIM THE RIVER MERSEY?

The TV presenter tells us why he decided
to make a series about Britain's great rivers.